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SUBJECT: ARAB LEAGUE LEBANON MTG POST-MORTEM

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[1](#)B. 2007 CAIRO 3562

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stuart Jones
Reasons: 1.4 (B) and (D)

[1](#)1. (S) Summary. The GOE MFA Cabinet Advisor for Syria-Lebanon was downcast following the January 27 Arab League ministerial session on Lebanon. He did not see significant progress toward a pro-majority solution, and worried that the Syrians were succeeding in wearing down moderate Arab states. In his assessment, the Arab League's position on Lebanese cabinet formation is still open to competing interpretations of the majority and minority. It was unclear to him if cabinet formation, and election of the president, would occur by February 11 (as called for in the Arab League January 27 statement). In a separate meeting, the Arab League Deputy Chief of Staff tried to spin the result in a positive light. End summary.

[1](#)2. (S) MFA Cabinet Advisor Nazih Neggary told us on January 28 that the Arab League ministerial meeting, and subsequent statement on Lebanon, were a disappointment. In preparatory meetings Neggary said the Egyptians had sought a text that would "express the demands of the Lebanese majority." The three main points for the GOE heading into the ministerial meeting were to a) stress the importance of immediate election of a president; b) clarify that the majority should not get more than 15 ministers, while the minority should get no more than 10; and c) send a message that the political impasse should not lead to a security crisis in Lebanon. He said that the Saudis, and the Secretary General, had accepted this framework in pre-meetings. The Qataris agreed to try to bring Syrians along. In the pre-meetings, the Syrians had reportedly considered dropping the demand for the "blocking third" in return for continued recognition of Hizballah's right to be in the government (per Siniora's government formation in 2005).

[1](#)3. (S) However, in the ministerial meeting, the Syrians took the position that there should be no material changes to the language on cabinet formation from the January 6 text, arguing that it was not in need of refinement or interpretation. SYG Moussa argued that refinement was needed, because it had been poorly drafted at the January 6 meeting and did not make clear the Arab League consensus that the Lebanese opposition should not have a "blocking third." The ambiguity in the text had allowed for the Lebanese minority to interpret a "10-10-10" cabinet, and this needed to be remedied in order for Moussa's negotiation efforts to succeed. According to Neggary, Moussa complained at the ministerial meeting that Lebanese opposition members had mocked him on his recent visit to Beirut, telling him that

"he did not speak good enough Arabic" to interpret the meaning of the passage, something that had infuriated him. Moussa also attempted to support a pro-majority cabinet position by citing the fact that the majority had accepted his offer of a 13-7-10 formulation, but that the opposition had rejected it (this is contained in Moussa's Lebanon report, which he has submitted to the Arab League).

14. (S) According to Neggary, the Arab League participants were about evenly divided, with Syria (joined most vocally by Oman and Libya) arguing that the "west was out to get them, and that the Arabs had to come together." The Egyptians and Saudis tried to counter this pressure, but it was extremely difficult. After more than eight hours, a compromise was reached. On the positive side, a firm date for the election of Michel Sleiman was given (February 11). However, Neggary was most concerned about "section 2b" that called for the Lebanese to "conduct consultations to agree on the basis of the formation of a national unity government." This will most likely be interpreted to mean that cabinet formation is a condition for the election of a Sleiman, Neggary said. The GOE had argued for clear sequencing, with the election of the president to be followed by cabinet formation, but this had been lost in the compromise language. (Note: The statement also calls for "preparation of an electoral law after the government is formed.")

15. (S) Neggary commented that the Lebanese were not as forceful as they could have been, especially on the issue of cabinet formation. In a phone call to us immediately following the ministerial, he complained that the Lebanese had "given in to intimidation." On January 28th, he was less blunt, and said that Lebanese Acting FM Tarek Mitri had been dignified and statesman-like, but unwilling to pound his fist when necessary. Mitri had been put on the defensive by Omani

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claims that he was merely representing the Lebanese majority, as opposed to the Lebanon as a whole, reportedly declaring at one point that "I am not the president of Lichtenstein."

16. (C) Talal Amin, Deputy Chief of Staff to Arab League Secretary General Moussa, told us January 28 that the Arab

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League goal now was to reach a solution that both sides agreed on. We prodded him on the ambiguity of the cabinet-formation text, and he contended that it was a "constructive ambiguity" that kept both sides at the bargaining table. He said the key was to keep Lebanon from descending into violence. Moussa would most possibly travel in the next week to Beirut to resume his efforts. Amin opined that using the Arab League ministerial as pressure on Syria may work, but many believe it will not.

17. (S) Note and Comment: Neggary, who served at the Egyptian embassy in Beirut prior to his current assignment as cabinet advisor, is the most anti-Syrian of our key GOE interlocutors, and he acknowledges that Egypt's Lebanon policy is shaped by several GOE actors. He opined that the Syrians are increasingly convinced they can wear down the Arab League, and the Lebanese majority. "These Syrians want us to give up," he said. He noted that Syrian FM Moallam had a complete grasp of the intricacies of the situation, whereas most of the foreign ministers did not, and that this has consistently given the SARG an advantage in restricted sessions. For Moallam and the Syrians, Lebanon was far and away their number one foreign policy goal, whereas the other Arab states do not attach the same importance to it. He complained that the USG, and others, need to stop viewing Lebanon as a secondary regional issue but rather as a critical part of one major issue: extremism versus moderation.

JONES